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Forty Years of Truth Seeking

AN ADDRESS

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The First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis maintains an absolutely free platform, so that the utterances therefrom do not commit the society as a whole, but only the speaker.

This address was delivered by the minister on the Sunday preceeding the fortieth anniversary of the organization of the Society, and is chosen as the one for publication of this month because it relates in brief the history of the Society and the relation it has borne to contemporary thought during this period, likewise its purpose and method.

Additional copies of this pamphlet may be procured from the Publication Committee, 803 La-Salle Avenue, Minneapolis, Minn. Price five cents.

Forty Years of Truth Seeking

My address this morning is in recognition of the fortieth anniversary of the founding of this Society and this occasion sets and limits my task for today. I am to recall the circumstances of its birth and to note something of the stages of its growth. To be intelligibile and profitable this must be done in connection with the contemporary drift and tendency of the thought of the age. We shall thus see which way the world of thought seems to be moving and the part we have played in this movement, whether we have stood for the truth or been an advocate of the conventional and the expedient. We are then to look backward for awhile in order that we may learn how to look forward, and in our backward look there are two fields that we must try to cover; first, our local and personal life; and second, the contemporary life of the time. Anniversary days are the occasion for biographical review. I should not be forgiven if I let this hour go by without asking you to remember the more important facts of your own biography. Let us then turn to some of the main items of

OUR LOCAL AND PERSONAL LIFE.

Next Friday, November 18th, will be the fortieth anniversary of the adoption of the articles of incorporation of this organization as a religious society. The organization is older than this, however, and we ought really to have celebrated our fortieth birthday a number of years ago. While the actual beginning of the little group of men known as The Liberal League is somewhat hazy, it is

fairly well known that these men came together as the result of some scientific lectures given as early as 1872. These lecturers were denounced by the clergy of the city, but they appealed strongly to a few independent and thoughtful minds. These later formed themselves into The Liberal League, mostly for the purpose of promoting more such lecturers; and it was this Liberal League that formed the nucleus of what in 1881 was formally organized into The First Unitarian Society.

This League met rather intermittently in a hall at the corner of Washington and Nicollet Avenues. For a number of years it had no regular speaker except for a short time when it was served by Mr. Washburn, a young Unitarian minister of Massachusetts. This League was composed of almost every kind of person, representing every degree of culture from the rough frontiersman to the university graduate. It was formed and largely maintained by the man who for twenty-five years was the moving force of this organization, Mr. Samuel C. Gale. He promoted the enterprise, he harmonized the widely differing elements, and he gave lavishly of his time and money to its support. The attitude of the orthodox community toward this League is well shown in a cartoon which appeared in a Minneapolis paper about this time. It is the picture of a high bluff on one side of a stream; on the other side of the stream are the members of the League, easily identified, with guns in their hands attacking this fortress of Christianity, the guns being labeled "Rationalism," "Science," "Morality," etc. It is dated "Anno Darwini '67," and is named "And the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it." In the controversy created by this cartoon the man responsible for it said: "In the cartoon in question the idea was intended to be conveyed that Christianity and professing Christians would sustain little real injury by the shafts of ridicule and abuse that are every day hurled at them by the Liberal League."

In the summer of 1881 a member of the St. Paul Unitarian Church wrote Mr. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, then Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, that there was a possibility of starting a Unitarian Society in Minneapolis

with this League as a nucleus, if the right man could be found for its minister. Mr. Jones came to look over the situation and as a result of his visit the group sent an invitation to Mr. Henry M. Simmons to become its regular minister. Mr. Simmons accepted this invitation and began a ministry which lasted twenty-five years, until his death, and it is with his name the early history of the Society is closely identified. He brought about its organization, he determined its character, he molded its thought. Doctor Hosmer says of him: "As a preacher and writer his power of presentment was quite unusual. His style was clear and strong, touched often by great poetic beauty, and always effective. His sermons were arrows shaped and feathered with grace, keenly pointed, and going straight to the mark. A bright humor often shone in the sentences and they needed that relief. In his convictions he was not infrequently at variance with those whom he addressed. He held them strongly and gave them voice with utter boldness. If a stroke gave pain, a drop of genial wit fell at the same time upon the wound as a compensating balm. The sweetness of his nature, his entire sincerity, his consecration to the service of the highest truth, were never in question and many loved him who could not accept him." His sermons attracted much attention in the city and in most quarters aroused strong opposition, for he was the pioneer in this community, the missioner of the philosophy of evolution, especially in its relation to the religious life. In spite of the opposition to him, however, he was elected the most popular minister in Minneapolis in 1888 at the Exposition, and the respect in which the community held him is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that one of our public schools bears his name.

This Society held its first meetings in a hall of the Adventists on the second floor of a building down below Third Street on Nicollet Avenue, and there were usually present only a score of people. They immediately took steps toward formal organization. On the last Sunday of October, 1881, a committee was appointed to draw up and report a plan and the next Sunday, November 6th, this committee reported a constitution and by-laws which

were adopted, and the Society was legally incorporated on November 18th, under the name of "The First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis." Let it be said, however, that it disclaimed any sectarian spirit and declared in its constitution that it aimed to be one where "people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work, and that all persons whatsoever who sympathize with these aims shall be welcome to this Society." The first Board of Trustees consisted of Samuel C. Gale, James A. Lovejoy, Robert Hale, Woodbury Fisk, Orlando C. Merriman, the last named being chairman.

The congregation soon outgrew the little hall and on New Year's Day, 1882, they began to occupy the Jewish Synagogue located at that time where the New York Life Building Annex now stands on Fifth Street. Notwithstanding the difficulties of this early period the Society continued to grow. In 1885 steps were taken toward a building which resulted in this present edifice which was dedicated in June, 1887, the principal address being delivered by Doctor Samuel Crothers, now of Cambridge, Mass. This building was considered a triumph in those days and a prominent architectural critic in an article on the buildings in Minneapolis appearing in Harper's Magazine, pointed it out as the most significant piece of architecture in the city. Here, again, this Society owes a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Gale, for not only did his financial contribution make possible the present building, but he gave most of his time to seeing that it was properly built. The contractor stated that not a single stone was laid which was not examined with critical care by Mr. Gale.

With the splendid equipment of this building at that time the Society took on new life. Different departments of church work were organized and carried on with success. The Sunday morning meetings were then, as now, the principal feature of the church's activities. Mr. Simmons by his vigorous and thoughtful preaching had attracted an unusual audience of independent and thoughtful people, among them a goodly proportion of the city's leading men and women. The Society established for itself a very prominent place in the religious life of the community. It suffered severely from the financial panic in the early '90s, but it recovered entirely and maintained its vigor until the death of Mr. Simmons on May 26th, 1905.

From this time on it is fitting that I should only mark a few dates and avoid any personal comment. The two ministers who served this Society between Mr. Simmons and myself are still living, and if I should set the bad example of a critique on either them or their work the man who comes after me may be tempted to follow that example to my own confusion. In 1906 Mr. Edwin Stanton Hodgin took up the work which was left by Mr. Simmons and was just beginning to make himself felt in the community when he left two years later for the Unitarian Church in Los Angeles. And then came Mr. Wilson M. Backus, in 1908, who continued the work for seven years. Both of these men, like Mr. Simmons and myself, came into the Unitarian fellowship from some orthodox faith and had something of the zeal of the recently converted missionery. With each of us there has been a considerable change of the personnel of this Society. In a free church such as this the membership is largely a personal following of the man in the pulpit. Therefore, with each change of ministry many of the devoted adherents of the previous minister drop out and others for whom the appeal of the new man has attraction come in. There was one event during the ministry of Mr. Backus which should be mentioned. In 1912 the interior of the church building was entirely destroyed by fire, but as a result of the sturdy efforts of the minister and people it was immediately rebuilt. Perhaps I should say too that in order to widen Eighth Street it was necessary a few years ago to take ten feet off the front of the building, which somewhat spoiled the lines of the exterior but had no serious effect upon the interior. As to the work during my own ministry I touched upon this last Sunday when I spoke on "Ten Years in a Free Pulpit."

I have not time today to go into details as to your condition during these years, even were it appropriate for me to undertake the task. I do want to say just a word in regard to your financial condition, a subject which I have never mentioned from this pulpit before and probably shall never mention again. This Society has seen periods of great financial difficulty in its history but it has weathered every one, and six years ago it paid the last cent of debt on this property so that today this very valuable property without any incumbrance whatever belongs to this Society; and for this we owe a deep debt of gratitude to the men and women of the past, some of them gone and some of them still living, for their untiring efforts in this direction. It leaves us in a very happy condition with no expense whatever except the current expenses of running the institution. This we have just

been able to do. During my ministry here there has been no surplus in the treasury, nor has there been a deficit. From year to year we have come out about even, but this fact does not indicate that there has not been financial progress, for your expenses have practically doubled in these five years. Your budget then was about $5,000, whereas for this year it is practically $10,000.

In connection with this I should like to say that it behooves every one of us to give such financial support to this organization as we are able. This Society does not contain any wealthy people to fall back upon in case of deficit, as do many churches, and for the same reason it can not expect any large contributions. Parenthetically, I might add that for this I am glad because the moment any church is dependent upon the unusual contributions of one or two people the freedom of the minister disappears. To keep a church democratic its sources of revenue must be spread over a large surface. This is the case with us. This society is dependent upon small and moderately sized contributions from many people. So I bespeak for this Society your financial support in the future. I ask this because I want you to stand by this church and see to it that it is kept in the front where it belongs. I believe with all my soul that we stand for the future of the intelligent world's religion. I believe that we stand for the things that are absolutely necessary for the healing of this badly diseased world and I am anxious that we shall maintain a position that will give us all the natural advantages of leadership. But it is time for me now to turn and consider the religious changes and growth of the period covered by our church life.

THE CONTEMPORARY LIFE OF THE TIME.

It was about a decade before this church was born that Theodore Parker died in Florence when he said: "There are two Theodore Parkers—one is dying here in Italy. The other I have planted in America. He will live there and finish my work." To my mind Theodore Parker was the greatest influence for religious freedom in the last century; but like all great men, Parker stood as only the most conspicuous figure representing an epoch. That epoch marked the transition from a Christianity of texts and formulas to one of spirit and life. Until he preached his famous sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" even our American Unitarianism had been only a chrysalis. Then it burst its useless and cramping shell and soared in the sunshine, bouyed upon the wings of freedom. The rest of the grubs saw only the empty shell

and supposed that it meant death and destruction; but the soul of truth no longer imprisoned took the whole universe for its home.

Into this epoch of free and wider life this Society was born. It would have been false to its opportunity and recreant to its highest obligation had it not felt the thrill and been obedient to the impulse of this new and higher life; and I am proud today that I am able to say that The First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis has kept in the van of the freest and most advanced religion of the age. Never has this pulpit been muzzled, never has your preacher been reduced to the contemptible necessity of cringing about among his people during the week to find out what it was safe for him to say on Sunday. Through your whole history you have had freedom enough for both pulpit and pew. You have respected his right to utter his honest thought, and he has respected your right to differ from him. So you have earnestly and honestly worked together, anxious only that your united action should "bear witness to the truth." Truth only have you sought, however, clothed, disguised or despised, and when found you have been ready to bow at her feet and pay her the homage due a god.

Then, again, during the period of your brief life it is hardly too much to say that the orthodox world has been transformed. Claiming to be the perfect transcript of a finished, divine revelation, it has also consistently claimed to remain the same always and everywhere; but like an iceberg floating from its glacial home in the north it has felt the fanning of other airs and the kiss of warmer seas. And though it keeps its stately course over the ocean, flashing back the sunshine and still looking blue and cold as in the past, it is really honeycombed and changed throughout its whole structure. It is permeated with a softer atmosphere and so transformed that the men of forty years ago would not know it. I mention this with no taunt in my tone but only with a feeling of joy, and as being a part of the picture of the transition time in which we have lived and to which we have contributed our part. When Channing first began to preach his new and nobler faith there was not even a hall, to say nothing of a church, in New York wherein he was permitted to preach. Today the message of Channing is being preached in half the orthodox pulpits of this land. When Theodore Parker was preaching in Boston the orthodox church offered up prayers every Sunday that the Lord put a hook in his jaws that he might not be able to speak. Today there are a hundred orthodox pulpits in which the preaching of Parker would be perfectly safe, or even conservative. A few men here and there,

like Doctor Riley, have been trying to persuade the tide not to rise but the only result has been that they have felt the spray of the advancing waves flung in their faces.

No, the forces of truth are beckoning on the waters and no human obstinacy can keep them back. They have already swamped the five points of Calvinism—the supposed rock of Bibical infallibility is washed away; the fall of man is out of sight; the dark and craggy cliffs of God's hate are undermined; the divine jealously of the human intellect is under the waves; and the fires of hell are drowned. Above the waters a new continent is rising, bathed in the sunshine of eternal love, and its new soil shall be turned into an Eden fairer than the visionary one of the past. Well may I say to you "Blessed are the eyes that see the things that ye see," and more blessed still are you in having had your part in bringing about these glorious results.

There is one phase of our especially denominational life that it is fitting I should touch upon today. It was just about the time that this Society came into existence that serious discussion arose within Unitarianism itself which for a time threatened to tear it asunder. The question at stake was as to whether Unitarianism was brave enough and confident enough in the truth to trust itself to perfect intellectual freedom and submit its position to the test of the scientific method, the only one that has ever been fruitful in truth finding results. For a while the majority drew back hesitating to launch its bark fearlessly on the current of the age and a little minority went out, causing for a time a split in the ranks; but this was only a split in a growing tree, the vigor of whose life was able to heal again. These few men stood by their flag of utter intellectual freedom, and the majority later found themselves close by their sides once more.

In those days the minister of this church was on the side of that minority which believed that we should not be bound within the limits of formula or creed; and today we know that the minority was right and today we should feel proud again that this Society has helped win for Unitarianism absolute freedom in the search for truth. It seemed to me important to notice this aspect of our history as it covers the one great conflict over the question as to whether we should be creed bound like all the other churches, or whether we should be the first great religious body of the world that should dare trust itself to the integrity of the human mind and the free spirit of inquiry.

The brief period of our church life coincides with and covers one other change blended with, but greater than

those I have so far indicated. Not many years previous to our beginning was the birth of the grandest revolution that ever affected human thought, the publication of Darwin's "Origin of Species." This book precipitated a world wide conflict out of which a new universe has been born. About the same time Herbert Spencer began to work out his synthetic philosophy founded upon the results of Mr. Darwin's scientific inquiry. These two master minds stand like twin mountains, sky-kissing in their sublimity and overlooking all the modern world. Spencer is the more far reaching and comprehensive in his grasp, while Darwin outranks any purely scientific brain that the world has ever seen. Why do I mention these today? Because our church life so nearly covers and runs parallel with this most revolutionary movement of all the ages. Neither of these men said much about theology or religion, but they compelled theology and religion to say a great deal about them. Literally they gave us a new universe by helping us to see things as they are. A new world, a new god, a new man, a new destiny, nothing less than these express the stupendous changes coincident with the last forty years. Never in all earth's history before has so vast a revolution of thought passed over the human mind.

I have a right to speak of this today because no pulpit in America has been more hopefully outspoken in regard to the religious side of this great movement than has this one. Every minister of this church from Mr. Simmons down to myself has tried to help on the adjustment of modern religious thought to these great new truths. We have all held fast to our faith that no advance or broadening of human knowledge could leave religion behind; and while other representatives of religion have been fighting science this church has held that science has really been building religion's throne and preparing for her brow an imperishable crown and for her hand a sceptre of world dominion.

Such, then, in brief outline are some of the changes that have been coincident with the short life history of this Society. No more religiously eventful period has the world ever seen, and in the great issues we have always been on the side of victory and the future. I am proud of our record, regretting only that I have been able to represent and serve you in it no more efficiently. In our next forty years we have only to go on in the pathway in which we have entered. Greater religious achievements await us, if we are only worthy to attain them.

OUR PURPOSE AND METHOD.

And now in what time remains I shall speak briefly of the purpose and method of this Society during this period. I have referred to it in my subject as "Forty Years of Truth-seeking," and literally that has been our purpose. Our foundation principle is that the purpose of life is to live and therefore the supreme thing to be attained is the full, free, complete, abundant life. This kind of life is, of course, dependent upon obedience to the laws of the universe which are the conditions of life, and a true knowledge of these conditions of life is what is usually spoken of as truth. This organization from the beginning until now has given itself to the search for this truth. On this search it believes depends the salvation of the world. All that which we call evil to be escaped and all that which we call good to be attained, and this by finding and conforming to the truth—this is our creed. Truth physical, truth intellectual. truth moral— this is our platform and our aim. Whatever this is found to include we have always held, whatever it has not included we have been ready to cast aside, because we have not been interested in any formula of belief, but only in the truth.

Of course, all religious institutions believe themselves to be interested only in the truth, so the real difference between this organization and other religious bodies lies in the fact that these others believe they have already found the truth and have formulated it in certain statements of faith while we believe that the universe is constantly unfolding itself to the inquiring mind of man. The churches therefore represent a static condition while this organization has always been a progressive movement. The churches in general assert and enforce a creed which is presented as a formal statement of truth that one must believe to be saved. We put our emphasis on the method of discovery, being always on the lookout for larger and clearer views of truth and duty. What seems essential to us is not any transient form of opinion but the method of truth finding by which progress is made continuous. Christians defend the faith once delivered to the saints but we earnestly listen to living voices for the revelation of a still more glorious gospel. Dogmatists decry innovations and stand guard on the ancient walls built around the sanctities of piety by a Luther, a Calvin or a Wesley; but we, discarding the rusty armor and leaving behind crumbling traditions, keep in the open field and on the march, feeling that no one is so safe and so strong as he who is in pursuit of the truth. We move forward not because we lack appreciation of past worthies and olden symbols, not because we are disturbed by doubt or distracted by uncertainty, but because we have

confidence in the unfolding process, and also because we have confidence in the leadership of truth under whose banner we march. We seek to be the vanguard of the great religious army—where the vanguard is camped today there the army will be tomorrow; aye, but the vanguard will be another day's march beyond. And so with us. Where we stood forty years ago many Christian churches stand today, but we stand another forty years beyond.

It was this spirit of advance in the search for truth that animated our founders. They did not ally themselves with Unitarianism because they rejected the dogma of the Trinity. They became Unitarians because they placed themselves under the command of reason, and accepted the modern discoveries of science and philosophy. Their disbelief in the Trinitarian formula was merely incident to their attitude toward all problems of their time, and whether or not we continue their work successfully depends wholly on whether or not our attitude and spirit are still the attitude and spirit of these founders. Observe that I speak not of their thoughts and their methods. We can not go back to them. I speak of their attitude, their spirit. During the forty years since their day, a period during which the world has gained larger knowledge of the real conditions under which it exists than it ever before gained during the passage of thousands of years, the thoughts of men have indeed widened with the process of the suns; and our methods of thought and action should be higher and further reaching because the real needs of men are now more clearly seen. But the attitude of those men and women, their spirit, was for all time. For this cause founded they this church, that it might bear witness to the truth, that it might be a cry in the wilderness, that it might voice the call of the discoverer "Pioneers, Oh pioneers," that it might spy out and subdue country for the fulfilling of the new human needs and aspirations that evermore arise. This church was not born simply to merge itself in time in the world of other churches whose tendency, if not whose aim, is to forget world duties for the sake of fraternal greetings. This church came into the world not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give its life a ransom for many. It came not to cry in the religious world "Peace! Peace!" when there is not and can be no peace until the conditions of peace are first provided. No, it came not to bring peace but a sword. That was the origin of this Society. In the words of Walt Whitman:

"For we cannot tarry here,
We must march, my darlings, we must bear the brunt of battle;
We reach out upon a newer, mightier world, varied world,

"Conquering, holding, venturing, daring, as we go the unknown ways,—
Pioneers! O pioneers!"

The current tendency today among all religionists is compliance and compromise. In all departments of religious life and endeavor there is the gathering together of all those who already "think as we do or very nearly as we do," there is a belittling of this or that essential difference in order that we may combine. There is the patting of each other on the back and pretending that white is not so very white and black not particularly black, or at least not sufficiently black and white to contend for a difference. And all the while there lies before us a new universe crying to us to fit man to it that he may inherit and enjoy and go forth conquering and to conquer—with only a handful of men and women here and there taking any notice. If we would be true to the purpose of this church our attitude should be that of Wendell Philips when slavery was at last abolished in this country. He said: "Slavery being done away with, what is the next greatwaiting human need to which tomorrow morning we should begin to devote our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honors." And so we should cry "Many of the things in protest of which this Society was founded being done away with, what is the next great waiting religious need to which we should devote our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honors?" The soldier of mankind is never mustered out.

So let us not sit down and congratulate ourselves today because much of what we worked for in the past has been accomplished. Never in its history has this Society been needed so much as it is today. Notwithstanding all of man's mighty advance in actual knowledge of the universe during the forty years of our existence what church or form of religion really recognizes, much less emphasizes, the actual relation in which we now know that men stands to the universe? What church or form of religion today really recognizes, much less emphasizes, the absolute reign of natural law? It is an actual fact that this world is controlled and molded by means of the cooperation of man with the unchanging natural law, and yet the churches go on prating about the work of God by means of supernatural methods. Here is the great work for us—setting forth the truth in order that man might begin to adapt himself to the truth; in order that he might begin to conform himself to the facts of nature and to the real means of human blessedness; in short, that he might understand that all the blessings which come to mankind come not from beseeching God but from creating them himself; that he might hear the insistent cry: "You yourselves must do the good that you desire."

And now in conclusion I wish to lay one thing on your consciences and hearts. I am proud of the record of this church during the past forty years and as I look back over its history I am proud to be its minister and I believe that greater religious achievements await us if only we are able to accomplish them. In relation to the new life and thought of the age this church occupies an enviable position. We are right on the firing line and if in the fight you stand by me I promise that we shall not retreat. And in this respect let me say just one thing and concerning that I wish to take you all into my confidence: If you will do your part, stand together and keep this church in the position of power and leadership which it has earned the right to hold, while no one can make definite promises concerning his future, I should ask no better thing than—If you should continue to wish it—to live and labor and die among you. To make me content to do this I shall expect you, however, to see to it that we are amply supplied with funds and kept in this strategic position. Keep me where I can do my work to advantage and supply me with the wherewithal to do it and I shall find no fault with its difficulties or its amount.

As then we survey the first forty years of our church life just two words spring up in our minds and seek utterance on our tongues, gratitude for the past and hope for the future.

While there has been no definite program in regard to the publication of Mr. Dietrich's addresses, it has been the custom for some years to publish one every now and then. The titles listed below are still available and may be obtained by application to the Publication Committee, 803 La-Salle Ave., Minneapolis, at the price of five cents per copy.

Saved—From What?
The Duty and Opportunity of America
Paths to World-Federation
The Coming Conception of God
The Terrible Choice
The Philosophy of Nietsche
Unitarianism and Freedom of Thought
The Moral Meaning of Our Victory
Nationalism and Internationalism
The League of Nations
Of What Can We Be Certain?
"The Undying Fire"
The Twilight of The Gods
The Ethics of Violence
The Immor al in Man
The Relation of Religion to Mortality
The Origin and Development of Religion
Is There a World-wide Jewish Peril?
The Co-operative Movement and Industrial Democracy
The Business of a Church in These Days